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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001163

SIPDIS

LONDON AND PARIS PASS TO AFRICA WATCHERS
DIA/J2 PASS TO GHAYES

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA - GANGS OF PORT HARCOURT

REF: A. ABUJA 972
[B](#). LAGOS 1131

Classified By: JOSEPH GREGOIRE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B), (D), AND (E)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Recent gang fighting in the Port Harcourt area of the Niger Delta highlights yet another brand of violence in Nigeria (ref A). Reports from oil services and construction company security managers in the field estimate that up to 100 people may have died over three to four days of fighting last week. As witnessed in that fighting, once unleashed, the gangs of Port Harcourt become difficult to control, and pose a risk of collateral damage to both local residents and the area's oil services and shipping industries. In other areas of the South and North, simmering ethnic and religious tensions exacerbate struggles for power and resources that sometimes become deadly. But in the southern city of Port Harcourt, violence is often perpetrated by gangs originally formed as political enforcers during the 1999 and 2003 elections. These armed gangs have taken on the combined roles of vigilantes and guns for hire. Americans do live and work in Port Harcourt, but to date, we are not aware of any Americans killed or injured in this strand of violence. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Deadly clashes between rival gangs in the areas around Port Harcourt in the last week of May (ref B) highlight a brand of violence unique to this area of the Delta. Political heavyweights in Rivers State are said to have sponsored enforcer gangs to defend their positions and suppress their rivals. The gangs are well-armed and have grown in power and belligerence. We can identify several of the gangs and their roots, and it seems two in particular, the Ateke Boys and the Bush Boys, are the central enforcers of Port Harcourt's thug-based rivalries.

The Ateke Boys: Governor Odili's Vigilantes

[1](#)3. (C) It is speculated that immediately following the 1999 general elections that ushered in a new hope for democracy in Nigeria, as well as the rising clout of the president's People's Democratic Party (PDP), Dr. Peter Odili, the then new PDP governor of Rivers State, sought to solidify his party's power base and eliminate any footholds maintained by the opposition All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). Dr. Abiye Sekibo, the present federal Minister of Transport, was Odili's state secretary at the time, and is said to have put together a gang of armed thugs loyal to the governor and the PDP, financed by State and/or party funds. These enforcers were deployed to ANPP strongholds in Rivers State, and targeted Chief Rufus Ada George, the former Abacha regime governor of Rivers State for whom Odili worked as deputy governor prior to the 1999 elections.

[1](#)4. (C) Over time these Odili-backed thugs grew in power and boldness. It is said they refused to give up their arms, and continued to operate in groups as vigilantes and mercenaries, willing to commit even murder for hire. The most notorious of these groups is led by a man called Ateke Tom, and became known as the Ateke Boys (a sub-set is known also as the Icelanders). Dennis Amachree, Halliburton's security manager who hails from a village at the center of the recent clashes, told us in January 2004 that the Ateke Boys rigged the 1993 polls in favor of the PDP and intimidated those who favored other candidates. Some say the Ateke Boys have since been considered outlaws by the Rivers State and federal governments. Amachree, however, alleges that when reports of excessive violence by the Ateke Boys caused the Inspector General of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) to send a team of investigators to arrest members of the gang and take them to Abuja, the Rivers State government intervened, convincing the NPF that the Ateke Boys were necessary vigilantes helping maintain law and order in the remote villages of the Niger Delta region. Amachree described the Rivers State NPF Command as frustrated, prevented by the leaders of the state government from taking action as the police watch the Ateke Boys flaunt their weapons and criminal activities.

The Bush Boys: Former Governor Protects Himself

15. (C) It is believed that former Rivers State governor Rufus Ada George sponsors a group of thugs of his own, known as the Bush Boys, to protect himself and his interests in the Port Harcourt area. Ada George was once arrested and detained by Odili, and appears to have decided to fight fire with fire. The Bush Boys, sometimes referred to as the Amadi-Ama Boys, periodically clash with the Ateke Boys over control of villages around Port Harcourt, and some 50 people are said to have died in such fighting in January.

Asari Gang: Rivalry Leads to Recent Violence

16. (C) During the 2003 elections, a vigilante group allegedly under the direction of Alhaji Asari Dokubo, the President of the Ijaw Youth Council, is said to have run similar intimidation and vote rigging schemes as the Ateke Boys, also on behalf of the PDP. A growing rivalry between the Asari gang and the Ateke Boys came to a head earlier this year over an attempt by the Ateke Boys (on behalf of a state government commissioner) to displace the traditional ruler of the area known as Kalibariland, west of Port Harcourt. The Ateke Boys moved into the town of Buguma after bloody clashes and "occupied" it for several months. The Asari gang retaliated in late May (ref B), calling in reinforcements from the Ijaw community and possibly the Bush Boys to displace the Ateke Boys.

17. (C) Managers from TSKJ construction company, a consortium led by Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown and Root, told us on May 28 that it suspended its boat traffic along the Bonny River and around Port Harcourt for the weekend in anticipation of the ongoing violence and possible response from the Nigerian Navy. Company managers were particularly concerned that the violence could escalate with an alliance among the Asari gang, the Bush Boys, and unaligned Ijaw fighters. They also were concerned that Governor Odili might support the Ateke Boys, fueling the fight and possibly shutting down river traffic. On June 2, news reports and oil services company sources indicated that President Obasanjo ordered Navy, Army and Mobile Police (MOPOL) assets deployed to Buguma and its environs to stabilize the situation, and Governor Odili urged the town's fleeing residents to return home and remain calm.

Naming Rites: International Smorgasbord

18. (C) We have also heard of a number of other gangs operating in and around Port Harcourt under names such as the Italian Boys and the German Boys. Their sponsors are yet unknown to us (as are the roots of their monikers), but the gangs seem to be involved in semi-organized criminal enterprises such as car theft rings and armed robberies. Toyota 4X4 trucks driven by many oil service companies are favorite targets.

19. (C) COMMENT. It seems Governor Odili of Rivers State took the same step to try to solidify his power base as other politicians and opportunists have done in other parts of the Delta; he armed a group of disenfranchised youths and paid them for their loyalty. And as we have seen in the conflicts around Warri, once these disenfranchised and disillusioned youths taste the power that comes from the barrel of a gun, it is impossible to convince them to give it up, and extremely difficult to keep them under control. Odili's thugs appear to have splintered, and are now fighting each other under the patronage of others. The governor of Rivers State may have reached a crossroads; because the state government has a vital interest in maintaining peace and commercial security in and around Port Harcourt, he may be forced to stop backing the Ateke Boys and let the police and federal forces clean up the area, if they can. As said by Halliburton's Amachree, "the government has created monsters that it cannot control." But control of the waterways of Port Harcourt and Bonny River is essential to maintaining shipping and oil services operations in the Delta. END COMMENT.

HINSON-JONES